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SUBJECT: MODI FLIRTS WITH JAYA, SPECULATION OF BJP-AIADMK ALLIANCE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On January 15, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi visited Chennai. Modi's visit, cloaked under heavy security, sparked several protests. His lunch with J Jayalalithaa, leader of Tamil Nadu's opposition AIADMK, fueled speculation of an AIADMK-BJP alliance in future elections. Speaking before a selected modestly-sized audience celebrating the anniversary of a Tamil magazine, Modi focused on economic development while still maintaining his tough rhetoric on terrorism and communal issues. Modi was dismissive about the U.S. government's denial of his visa. Although Modi energized the BJP's small group of staunch supporters in Tamil Nadu, the enthusiastic response of his audience is no clear indicator of the mood of the Tamil Nadu electorate, which for the most part is cool to Modi's aggressive Hindu nationalist message. END SUMMARY.

LUNCH DATE WITH JAYALALITHAA: FLIRTING WITH THE AIADMK  
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¶2. (U) Modi's first order of business was lunch with AIADMK leader J Jayalalithaa. The lunch dominated the local press, with stories lingering on the details of how long they spent together (two hours), what was served (forty-five different South Indian dishes), and what gifts they exchanged (he gave her a bouquet of flowers; she gave him a yellow silk shawl). The meeting fueled further speculation about the possible revival of the BJP-AIADMK alliance. Former BJP Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad, who accompanied Modi to the meeting, spoke to the press about the possibility of an alliance. "A right ambience has been created by the meeting. There are commonalities between our parties on a whole range of issues," but he reportedly added, "We do not want to rush into things now. An alliance, if any, has to be discussed with the national party leadership." Neither Modi nor Jayalalithaa commented publicly on the issue.

PREACHING TO THE CHOIR IN TAMIL NADU  
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¶3. (SBU) Invited to celebrate the anniversary of maverick publisher Cho S. Ramaswamy's right-of-center Tamil magazine Thuglak, Modi spoke at the modesty-sized Kamaraj Auditorium, which seats approximately 2,500. A Consulate staff member was able to attend only after contacting Ramaswamy's office because demand was so high for the limited seating that people reportedly started lining up at around 1:30 p.m. for the 6:30 p.m. event. Police contacts reported that more than 1000 people were turned away and watched the proceedings on a large outdoor screen.

¶4. (SBU) Ramaswamy set the tone for the evening by mocking Sonia Gandhi's reference to Modi as a "merchant of death" by calling Modi the "merchant of death ... to corruption, and to terrorism." With the audience primed by Ramaswamy's fiery introduction, Modi took the stage to thunderous applause. Modi focused first on development saying that it could only be achieved "when it was converted into a mass movement," citing Gandhi's efforts to engage all Indians in the independence movement. While referencing Gandhi along with Sardar

Patel, another icon of India's independence movement, Modi notably failed to mention any of the BJP's national leadership by name. Modi also did not run away from the harder-edged Hindu nationalist sentiment with which he is associated. He told the assembled crowd "if fighting terrorism is a crime, I am ready to pay the price for it," and asked whether "speaking against terrorism is communal?" Modi said the meaning of the term secularism had changed over time and that "today it means hate Hindus."

15. (SBU) Modi and Ramaswamy also discussed the U.S. government's decision to deny a visa to Modi. When an audience member asked about the issue Ramaswamy said "the loss is not Modi's, but the shame is of the U.S." He said the denial was the result of a rampant media campaign against Modi in the wake of the events of 2002. Modi himself later referred to the visa issue, saying "When the U.S. denied me a visa I said I will create America in my state and then they will come visit me."

SECURITY TIGHT A MODI'S MUSCULAR  
POLITICS MAKES HIM A TARGET IN TAMIL NADU  
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16. (SBU) Modi visited Tamil Nadu's capital on January 15, the eve of the four-day Tamil new year celebration known as Pongal. With Modi's brand of muscular BJP politics seen as out of the Tamil Nadu mainstream, security was exceptionally tight for the visit. A senior officer in the police intelligence service told us that due to the nature of the threats against Modi in Tamil Nadu he receives the same security coverage afforded the Prime Minister. (NOTE: BJP President L K Advani was the target of a failed assassination attempt in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu in 1998. END NOTE.) The police blocked major thoroughfares in downtown Chennai in advance of Modi's movements, severely restricted access to the areas where Modi visited, and engaged in aggressive preemptive detentions to ensure Modi's safety. Despite the preventive arrests and the fact that no permits were granted for planned protests, approximately one thousand people from a variety of interest groups -- Muslim, Christian, and Dalits for example -- protested against Modi's visit. The heavy security footprint also irked some average Chennaites: newspapers reported prominently on traffic disruptions and we overheard complaints at a local market about the inconveniences caused by Modi's security precautions.

MODI NOT ESPECIALLY POPULAR IN TAMIL NADU  
BUT ANOTHER SIGN OF A FUTURE BJP-AIADMK ALLIANCE  
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17. (SBU) COMMENT: One national daily described Modi's visit to Chennai as "a hit." The view from the South is a bit different. That he was enthusiastically received by the audience at Kamaraj Auditorium was to be expected: a self-selected group of readers of Ramaswamy's right-of-center journal was bound to be made up of many supporters of the charismatic BJP leader. But the size of the venue speaks volumes about Modi's relative popularity in the south. While he speaks before crowds of hundreds of thousands in Gujarat, he spoke to just a few thousand in Chennai. (In comparison, Chief Minister Karunanidhi drew more than 100,000 for the celebration marking his fifty years as a legislator.) Modi can energize the BJP's small group of hard-core supporters in Tamil Nadu (as he did on this visit), but because he is seen as far out of the South Indian political mainstream, Modi is probably a net political liability for the Tamil Nadu BJP and its potential partners.

18. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Nonetheless, Modi's meeting with Jayalalithaa is another step in the continuing courtship between the AIADMK and the BJP. Modi and Jayalalithaa are known to have a warm personal relationship, which likely propelled the headstrong opposition leader to host the lunch despite the potential political problems of meeting the controversial BJP leader. It is not surprising that the meeting did not result in a formal announcement of the alliance. Jayalalithaa has made clear before that she will not decide on alliance partners until much closer to the national election. But our contacts said that by hosting the controversial Modi for lunch Jayalalithaa "sent a clear signal" that "things are moving in the direction" of an alliance. If the likelihood of a BJP-AIADMK alliance is growing, the effect of such an alliance remains unclear. A moderate Muslim leader told us that the AIADMK would have "no chance" in Tamil Nadu if it joined up with BJP. A

media contact was more measured, saying that AIADMK and BJP alone might not beat the DMK-Congress partnership. We agree that the AIADMK-BJP pairing would probably run close to the DMK-Congress alliance, leaving Tamil Nadu's growing number of second-tier political parties -- the PMK AND DMDK in particular -- holding the key to victory. END COMMENT.

19. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi.

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